

Pete Stark's Legislative Report, Sept 2009

Friday, 28 August 2009

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KEEPING OUR SCHOOLS STRONG

As students return to school this fall they will be excited to continue learning and growing. Unfortunately, students and their parents will also face the reality of California's deep budget cuts to education.

The budget agreement signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger on July 28 will cut billions from public education and community colleges over the next two years. Proposition 13 and other revenue limits and distortions have resulted in our state balancing its budget on the backs of children and the poor. The consequences for our schools are fewer teachers, more crowded classrooms, and prohibitions on buying new textbooks.

Although the state budget situation is not good, it would be a lot worse without the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (H.R. 1), which continues to pump millions into our local schools at the time when they are most needed. I voted for H.R. 1 earlier this year and it is mitigating many of the state cuts to education.

Overall, California is expected to receive over \$11 billion in education funds over the next three years under the stimulus bill. These funds will primarily be used by school systems to prevent teacher and support staff lay-offs, enhance education opportunities for low-income students and those with disabilities, and backfill other budget cuts.

Our local districts have already received over \$25 million in direct education aid, with more assistance on the way. In addition to providing much-needed budgetary relief, these investments are also tied to school districts making reforms to increase student achievement so that all of our students will be prepared for the future.

Although H.R. 1 will not solve all of California's education problems, it does provide a lifeline until the economy turns around. With a new school year starting, it is important that the federal government continue to make the investments needed to ensure that all of our children have access to a world-class education.

PETE'S SEPTEMBER 2009 TOWN MEETINGS SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 12, 2009

FREMONT

9:00-10:00 am

Fremont Senior Center

40086 Paseo Padre Pkwy
SAN LEANDRO

10:30-11:30 am

San Leandro City Hall

835 E 14th St

ALAMEDA

Noon-1:00 pm

Alameda City Hall

Council Chambers

2263 Santa Clara Avenue

MAKING COLLEGE MORE AFFORDABLE

We must ensure that all young women and men have access to a college education. Congress is doing its part to keep higher education more affordable.

This summer, students began seeing lower interest rates as the first cut of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of

2007 went into effect. This legislation lowered interest rates on need-based student loans, from 6 percent to 5.6 percent. Every year these rates will drop until they reach 3.4 percent in 2011.

Pell Grant scholarships that help low- and moderate-income students were also increased through both the 2007 legislation and the stimulus bill passed earlier this year (H.R. 1). The maximum scholarship is now \$5,350, more than \$600 above last year's award.

These programs help millions of students. Some 5.5 million students take out subsidized student loans each year and about 6 million students receive Pell Grant scholarships annually.

Congress is currently debating H.R. 3221, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009. This legislation would cut banks out of the business of administering federally-guaranteed student loans, eliminating a middleman that skims billions from taxpayers and students. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that these changes will save \$74.8 billion over ten years — money that can be used to further increase Pell Grant scholarships and further lower interest rates for federal student loans.

This bill passed the Education and Labor Committee in July and is awaiting a vote on the floor of the House. This is a key education priority for President Obama and I intend to support this legislation when it comes up for a vote later this year.

IMPROVING MEDICARE THROUGH HEALTH REFORM

For over 44 years, seniors and people with disabilities have had access to quality, affordable health care through Medicare. Prior to Medicare and Social Security, more than half of America's seniors lived in poverty. Today, that number is less than 10%. Medicare beneficiaries are the only population group in America — besides prisoners — who have guaranteed health care.

Through H.R. 3200, America's Affordable Health Choices Act, we are reforming our health care system so that everyone has quality, affordable coverage. It makes improvements to Medicare as well.

Probably the biggest frustration facing senior citizens is the Medicare drug program "donut hole". It's a giant gap in coverage for Medicare beneficiaries -- a component of former President Bush's Medicare drug program. H.R. 3200 eliminates the donut hole over a number of years so that Medicare beneficiaries will no longer face unaffordable medication costs. H.R. 3200 also eliminates cost-sharing for preventive services in Medicare so that more people will take advantage of these life-saving services. Recognizing the value of primary care, it also increases reimbursement for primary care services and creates a medical home program so that Medicare beneficiaries will have primary care doctors who are reimbursed better and therefore able to spend more time meeting their patients' needs.

needs. It also expands the range of mental health providers in Medicare so beneficiaries have better access to these vital services.

With many senior citizens living on fixed incomes, affordability is a key concern. Our legislation improves Medicare's financial assistance programs for those with lower incomes so that more beneficiaries will get the financial help they need.

Of course, health reform and Medicare improvements like these are not free. HR 3200 does include savings from the Medicare program as part of the way to pay for health reform. But, these savings do not come out of the pockets of beneficiaries. They are savings in provider payments that are supported by a wide array of nonpartisan experts. In fact, these savings will also help beneficiaries by lowering anticipated increases in Part B premiums and by extending solvency of the Medicare Trust Fund by an additional five years.

Opponents of health reform are seizing Medicare savings figures to scare senior citizens into opposing health reform. I encourage you to get the facts, not the fabrications, about health reform. You can visit my website at www.stark.house.gov/healthreform to learn more about HR 3200, America's Affordable Health Care Choices Act.

HEALTH CARE REFORM – MYTH VS. FACT

As Congress continues work to get health reform passed this year, opponents of reform have spread lies and misinformation about the bill. Below are some myths about H.R. 3200, America's Affordable Health Choices Act, and the facts:

MYTH: The bill establishes death panels that will ration care and promote euthanasia.

FACT: America's Affordable Health Choices Act provides Medicare coverage for patients to voluntarily speak with their doctors about

their values and preferences regarding end-of-life care if they so choose. These sessions are not mandatory. A similar provision was included in the 2003 prescription drug bill. The AARP, the American Medical Association, and Consumers Union all support this provision.

MYTH: 120 million people will be forced into a public health insurance plan.

FACT: Americans who get their coverage through their employer can keep it. Those who don't have employer coverage will get a wide range of plans, including a public health insurance option. No one is forced into any particular plan. You will choose. According to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), only 9-10 million people will choose the public health insurance plan after ten years.

MYTH: Illegal immigrants will get government assistance under health reform.

FACT: Section 246 of the bill (page 143), explicitly prohibits this. It states: "Nothing in this subtitle shall allow Federal payments for affordability credits on behalf of individuals who are not lawfully present in the United States."

MYTH: Health reform will add to the deficit.

FACT: Health reform is fully paid for. CBO estimated that the cost of the insurance reforms in H.R. 3200 was \$1.042 trillion over ten years, while the bill's cost savings and revenues totaled \$1.048 trillion —producing a \$6 billion surplus. In addition, many of the reforms to the health care delivery system will help control costs beyond the ten-year projections by CBO.

KEY VOTES

Defense Appropriations — H.R. 3326: Provides \$128.3 billion for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, \$9.3 billion for missile defense programs, and \$6.9 billion for new ships, planes, helicopters and armored vehicles that the Administration has said it doesn't want.

— Voted NO, passed the House 400-30 and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Food Safety Bill — H.R. 2749: Provides the FDA with new powers to protect children and families from contaminated food, and filled gaps in existing food safety laws.

— Voted YES, passed the House 283-142 and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Cash for Clunkers — H.R. 2751: Allows consumers to trade in older, gas-guzzling vehicles and obtain vouchers worth up to \$4,500 to help pay for new, more fuel-efficient cars and trucks.

âž Voted YES, passed the House 298-119, was passed by the Senate and signed into law.

Limiting Executive Compensation – H.R. 3269: Protects taxpayers and shareholders from excessive compensation practices, by giving shareholders a say on the pay top executives will receive and requiring federal regulators to monitor inappropriate or risky compensation practices.

âž Voted YES, passed the House 237-185 and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Agriculture Appropriations – H.R. 2997: Allows 700,000 additional mothers and children to access nutritious food through the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, and increases funding for the food stamps program by nearly 15%.

âž Voted YES, passed the House 266-160 and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Cap-and-Trade – H.R. 2454: Watered-down climate change legislation that does too little to curb global warming and gives credits for free to special interests.

âž Voted NO, passed the House 219-212 and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Replenishing the Unemployment Trust Fund – H.R. 3357: Provides funds so that states can continue to pay out extended Unemployment Insurance benefits, preventing 4.6 million workers from being dropped from this program.

âž Voted YES, passed the House 363-68, was passed by the Senate and signed into law.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE STIMULUS: RESTORING OUR WETLANDS

The stimulus bill (H.R. 1) is creating jobs in our community by investing in important infrastructure projects. One example is the restoration of wetlands around the Bay. In June, the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project received \$7.5 million through the

stimulus bill.

These funds will help the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project revive hundreds of acres of marshes and wetlands. The project will provide approximately 30 jobs to the community. In addition to creating jobs, the restoration of these wetlands will improve the Bay’s ecology, provide flood protection for neighborhoods and businesses, and increase public access along the Bay’s shoreline.

The South Bay Restoration Project is the largest tidal wetland restoration project on the West Coast, ultimately aiming to revitalize over 15,000 acres of wetlands. The project builds on the legacy of my good friend, neighbor, and mentor, former Rep. Don Edwards, who has done so much to protect the Bay.

This is one of many projects in the East Bay that has received funding from the stimulus bill. For more information on how the stimulus is helping the community, visit my website at www.stark.house.gov for an interactive map of projects that are being funded.

SERVICE ACADEMY INFORMATION NIGHT

High school students who are interested in attending a U.S. Service Academy are invited to attend the Service Academy Information Night on Thursday, September 17, 2009. Representatives from West Point, Annapolis, the Air Force Academy and merchant marine Academy will make presentations on behalf of their respective schools and be available to answer questions. my staff will also be on hand to answers question on how to apply for an appointment to an academy.

ACADEMY INFORMATION NIGHT

September 17, 2009 • 6:30 – 7:30 pm

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300 Estudillo Avenue • San Leandro, CA